

Additional Views on White House and Department of Homeland Security Cooperation  
Senator Susan M. Collins

The Committee's seven-month investigation INTO the preparedness for and response to Hurricane Katrina, by all levels of government, has been an extraordinary undertaking. The Committee has held 22 hearings with 85 witnesses, has received and analyzed 838,000 pages of documents, and has formally interviewed more than 325 individuals. This investigation has been the most comprehensive of the Katrina reviews, each of which has been useful in advancing the public's understanding.

The Committee has been relentless in its efforts to secure the information it has needed to ensure that the investigation is thorough and comprehensive. And we have succeeded. On October 7, 2005, the Committee sent extensive requests for documents and information to the White House and the Office of the Vice President. On January 12, 2006, the Committee sent another letter to the White House prioritizing the requests and asking for more documents and information. Throughout the process, we have been in direct communications with the White House to secure the documents and information that we required.

The Committee has been similarly adamant in its pursuit of documents and information from federal departments and agencies. The Department of Homeland Security alone has produced 350,000 pages of documents and made available more than 70 witnesses for interviews.

Moreover, when one federal entity refused to make key witnesses available for interviews, the Committee issued five subpoenas for Department of Justice personnel, who were promptly interviewed by Committee staff.

The Executive Office of the President has produced more than 17,000 pages of documents. These documents include memos, policy analyses, and emails with electronic attachments sent to individuals in the White House. The Committee also has received transcripts of the FEMA-hosted video teleconferences, including those in which the President or other White House officials participated. Collectively, these documents show us the information that the White House was receiving from various agencies before landfall and during the response phase. The production contains documents relating to the White House Task Force Katrina and includes lists of individuals attending White House-organized meetings and summaries of agency efforts. Also produced were documents that include information provided to the most senior officials within the White House during the critical period.

In addition to the documents, the White House has provided two extensive briefings on its role in the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, and a third briefing on the White House "Lessons Learned" report. All three briefings were presented by Ken Rapuano, the Deputy Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, who was deeply involved in the response to Hurricane Katrina at the White House. These briefings included significant question and answer sessions where Committee staff had the opportunity to explore issues in depth.

In addition to the information the Committee has received from the White House

document productions and briefings, the Committee has analyzed the “Lessons Learned” report, which further details the White House’s involvement in – and shortcomings relating to – the response to Hurricane Katrina. The 125 specific recommendations in the report include several suggestions that recognize problems with the White House’s role before or following the catastrophe.

The Office of the Vice President, too, produced documents that have helped us piece together its role, and that of the White House, with respect to Hurricane Katrina. Among the more than 6,300 pages of documents produced are substantive emails, policy memos, and reports on the economic impact of Hurricane Katrina. Some of the emails were from David Addington, Counsel to the Vice President (and now Chief of Staff). The OVP also produced daily reports of the White House Hurricane Katrina Task Force and Homeland Security Council agendas.

Finally, the Committee has gained insight into the White House role through the testimony and subsequent interview of former FEMA Director Michael Brown. In his February 10, 2006 testimony before the Committee and interview with Committee staff two weeks later, as well as through documents he produced directly to the Committee, Mr. Brown gave us his detailed view into the workings and deliberations of the White House during this critical period. As a result, the Committee has a well-developed picture of the White House’s interaction with the top federal official on the ground before and during the critical days after Katrina made landfall. We know that, through Mr. Brown’s communications with Deputy White House Chief of Staff Joseph Hagin, the White House was aware the day of the storm of the devastation that New Orleans had suffered. And we know, from documents produced to us by Mr. Brown, that White House Chief of Staff Andy Card was aware of what Mr. Brown had told Mr. Hagin.

While, as noted, the Committee has received extensive briefings from Homeland Security Council staff as well as more than 23,000 pages of documents from the White House and OVP, much of the Committee’s information on alleged communications between Michael Brown and the President and his staff comes from Mr. Brown, and Mr. Brown alone. The White House staff declined the opportunity to be interviewed, which would have allowed for an even more complete understanding of what transpired.

As a result of the Committee’s efforts, we have a clear window into the functioning and role of the White House in the days before and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. The Committee had ample evidence to draw conclusions on how to strengthen our nation’s ability to prepare for and respond to future catastrophes.